

THE OBSESSION

Entry No. 31 in Our Prize Story Competition

By HULBERT FOOTNER



"My Obsession Is
Mother Goose Rimes."

(Miss Erda Hammill and Miss Betty Buchanan in peignoirs and slippers are discovered toasting marshmallows over the open fire in the pink and white bedroom of the latter young woman. The hands of the clock on the mantel above their heads are about to meet at the top of the face. There is no light but that from the fire. Erda speaks.)

MY brother Corwin says it's an obsession—have you ever noticed how boys always sprout a crop of big words with their mustaches? It's like this: when your brain stops working for a moment, and your head is perfectly empty, before it starts off on a new track something rolls around in it like a pea on a hot shovel. I knew a girl at college who at such times always found herself muttering "Fourteen hundred and twenty-nine," and there was another who said "Ichthyosorcerous" over and over. She didn't know what it meant, and neither do I.

My obsession isn't so silly as that; it's Mother Goose rimes. And really, if you stop to think, there's a lot in Mother Goose. There seems to be a rime to fit every mood. When you're all trembly and jumpy, what could be better than, "Hey diddle diddle, the cat and the fiddle"? And when you're in the dumps doesn't "Three wise men of Gotham went to sea in a bowl" just express it? And when you're filled with that big, solemn feeling of I don't know what, you naturally say slowly, "Fee, fi, fo, fum, I smell the blood of an Englishman!"

One generally keeps an obsession to oneself, it sounds so silly. But mine helped me out of an awful scrape this summer. Wait till you hear!

I WAS almost engaged to Thomas Bunting, you know. No, I didn't care about him especially; but I had my plan of life all doped out, as Corwin says, and had decided not to care for anybody really. You see they all say I'm pretty, and seem to like me—I don't think so myself; but I suppose I have my moments,—so I was just going to be sweet to everybody alike, and not be bothered myself with any topsyturvy feelings.

It's true Thomas is so soft you could poke your finger through him; but he was a willing slave. He's tall and loose jointed, and he falls over everything or drops it, and the worst thing about him is, no one ever thinks of calling him Tom. He's a Thomas through and through. But I thought he would do as well as anybody.

I've changed my mind. Men are like marshmallows,—aren't they, Dear?—either like they come out of the box, floury, tasteless, and sticky; or else like this one, properly toasted, a little bitter and crackly on the outside and—oh! sweet underneath.

The Buntings asked me to go for a cruise down Chesapeake Bay in their motor yacht. Of course I knew what this meant. This was to clinch matters. They would have invited the lady in the moon if their darling had cried for her. But I was quite willing to let it happen. I had some lovely yachting clothes.

"It's going to be a picnic, my dear," Mrs. Bunting said to me. "We won't take any servants. I shall do the cooking, Thomas will steer, and we're taking a

young man from Mr. Bunting's office who knows all about machinery. He's a gentleman and will be quite one of us," she thought it necessary to add.

Mrs. Bunting, I should tell you, is a dear little old fashioned totipoly, with her front hair waved and laid down smooth on each side of her forehead. She always has a surprised and scandalized look. Her husband has been poking fun at her for twenty-five years, and she still takes him seriously. She's a little baby on the subject of her Thomas.

It was great fun getting ready, though Thomas scarcely ever left my side, and when he did his mother would be whispering his praises in my ear, or his father would drop perfectly transparent hints of what he meant to do for Thomas later on. The Lord! was a love of a boat, and I was to have the cunningest little stateroom!

Everything went well until just before the start from Sparrows Point, when I met the young engineer, and he had a perfectly horrible effect on me. His name was French Straker. He was the dark, thin kind that looks so well in rough outing clothes. He had a kind of careless, scornful air. I had on my prettiest embroidered dress and my lingerie hat—and he scarcely looked at me! I spent ten minutes there on deck doing my prettiest to old Mr. Bunting, and that French Straker went on coiling his old ropes the whole time, and never looked around once! I felt like sticking out my tongue at him! He was very good looking, Dearest. He had that hard look that softens only for one girl, you know, and every girl that sees it wants to be it.

The strangest part of it was, I instantly began to hate Thomas in the most unreasonable way. His wrinkly white ducks, and his brass buttons, and his yachting cap, and his marine glasses were perfectly ridiculous. His canvas shoes clung to the deck like immense white pancakes. Thomas made calf's eyes, and breathed heavily down the back of my neck—you know the see-how-devoted-I-am kind. Good Heavens! I thought, what will the other one think of a girl who stands for this kind of thing? And I got hot and cold all over and found myself muttering, "Peter, Peter, pumpkin eater," a sure sign of threatening showers.



That French Straker Never Looked Around Once!

I HAD not been on board long before I discovered the only man that knew anything about a boat. Less than a hundred feet from the dock that silly Thomas, in his anxiety to show off, ran us smack in the mud. He blamed it on French Straker for answering the engine room signals wrong; but it was Thomas who got the bells mixed up. French Straker just showed

all his white teeth good naturedly, and got her off. After that he had to keep one eye on the engine and one on the steering wheel, or we should have been running into things all the way down the river.

You see, Dear, the trip started very badly for me, and it went from bad to worse. I had planned to manage everything so sweetly, and here I was quite distracted! I seemed to go all to pieces. I was furious with myself. You know how I always despised girls who had no control over their feelings. But that man always seemed to put me in the wrong. He was exasperatingly right in everything he did. He worked from morning till night; he could even wash dishes without losing his dignity.

The others treated him as something between a friend and a servant; but it never ruffled him. He went about his work looking as if he had pleasant thoughts inside his head that he didn't feel called upon to share with anyone. I didn't know how to act toward him. If I ignored him, I felt like a snob, and if I was friendly I felt as if I was throwing myself at him. At night I used to lie in my bunk thinking of the different kinds of food I had made of myself during the day. I repeated Mother Goose from end to end to keep from thinking of him; but the moment I fell asleep I started to dream of his handsome, good humored, scornful face, and would finally wake up weeping. There's a confession for a self-respecting girl to make!

Meanwhile, fancy how I was enjoying that overgrown Thomas' love-making! Thomas was like liquid glue. In the daytime I kept his mind distracted a good deal by letting him take my photograph. They turned out awful, and I destroyed them, except one that wasn't so bad. It showed me in my white Peter Thompson sitting among the cushions in the stern with an expression as if I had broken my best doll. I let him keep that; but the silly thing lost it, and I wouldn't let him have another.

I dreaded the approach of night. We always had at anchor in one of the harbors. The old people remained below—to keep out of the dampness, they said—and there was nothing for me to do but sit with Thomas in the stern. Very often French Straker would be sitting up in the point of the bow with his back to us, strumming on a guitar very softly. That's where my heart was! It was moonlight too.

I used to show Thomas as plainly as I could that I didn't like sitting close or anything; but you couldn't snub him! Talk about rhinoceros hide! Thomas' way with a girl was to make believe in the face of Heaven and earth that she was fond of him, and that a perfect understanding existed between them. What can you do with a man like that, short of making a regular scene? And how could I do that while I was a guest on board their boat?

His conversation was about as interesting as a patent medicine almanac. Thomas used to impart information. It's a wonder I didn't become a gibbering idiot. I used to close my eyes and think over the wonderful brilliance of Mother Goose as compared with Thomas.

ONE night he heard me muttering and asked me to repeat what I said.

I was too far gone to make any pretenses. I just opened my eyes in an innocent stare and murmured:

There was a man in our town,
And he was wondrous wise;
He jumped into a bramble bush
And scratched out both his eyes.
And when he saw his eyes were out,
With all his might and main
He jumped into another bush
And scratched them in again.

Thomas laughed in a constrained way, and tried to take my hand.

I ticked off his fingers. "This little pig went to market; this little pig stayed at home; this little pig had rare roast beef!"

Thomas dropped my hand as if it burnt him. "Can you find the lady in the moon?" he asked foolishly.

Thomas is like a cake that doesn't rise, or jelly that refuses to jell. There's something lacking. He became more and more alarmed at my foolishness, and of course I enlarged upon it. Finally I began to talk about insanity in an offhand way.

"It's a funny thing, isn't it?" I asked.

"I am unable to see the joke," said Thomas crushingly.

"But you never know



when you're crazy," I went on. "You always think you're a King or something. How jolly!"

"Poor unfortunate!" said Thomas, just like his mother.

"Everybody's crazy," I said, "about something. You knock against the subject accidentally, and—bang! there's an explosion."

"There's never been any in my family," said Thomas severely.

"Of course," I said sweetly. "That explains why you're what you are."

"Oh, I don't know," said Thomas deprecatingly. "Was there ever any in yours?" he asked, very offhand.

Fancy how I jumped at the chance! "Only my grandfather and two of my aunts," I said carelessly.

Thomas started.

"Isn't it funny? It is said they were always worse by moonlight," I added.

An expression of horror overspread his foolish face, and he moved away a little.

I made my eyes big and stared up at the moon. "I don't see anything unnatural about the cow jumping over it," I murmured.

"I think we'd better go below," said Thomas quickly. "It's getting very damp."

So I was saved for that night! How I hugged myself!

BUT that didn't help matters in the other direction at all. In the mornings Thomas and his father lay abed late, and I found, if I went up on deck when Mrs.

Bunting was starting breakfast in the galley, I could usually find French Straker there. He used to get up at an unearthly hour and go for a long swim. He was a splendid swimmer. He wouldn't go in with us. I am not so bad in the water myself; but he never noticed my performances. When I came on deck his cheeks would be pink and his eyes bright just to be alive in the early morning. You'll think I'm foolish, Dear, but he made me think of the shining creatures we imagined at sixteen. He wore his old working clothes as if they were a suit of armor.

At such moments he was almost human, and would look at me as if I were a person. But at the first approach of any real friendliness between us he would shy like a skittish horse, and then look as if he had been guilty of an awful weakness, making me feel as flat as a paper pattern on the cutting board.

I suppose you'll say it was a judgment on me. In all my life up to that time I had never been denied anything I wanted, consequently I never wanted anything much—and the first thing I did want I couldn't have! By night or day I couldn't think of anything but him. He bothered me to that extent I thought I must surely begin to hate him—but I couldn't. When he was in sight I was unhappy because he didn't notice me; but when he was out of sight I was perfectly wretched because I imagined him writing to some other girl, or looking tenderly at her picture. I was sure he carried some girl's picture in his pocketbook, he was so careful of it. How I hated her, whoever she was!



I Was So Happy
the Harbor Spun
Round and Round.

ONE morning when we lay off Solomons Island Mr. Bunting and Thomas took the little motorboat up to the dockyard to be fixed. Thomas has a perfect genius for getting things out of whack. Mrs. Bunting and I needed some sewing materials, and she asked French Straker to row me ashore in the dinghy. My heart jumped when I heard her; but unfortunately it was only a few hundred yards away.

He handed me into the dinghy with a face like a polite wooden Indian's. He had his coat over his arm, and as I got in the little pocketbook that was so much in my thoughts slipped out without his seeing it and fell in the bottom of the boat. When I sat down there it lay at my feet, and he had his back turned. Imagine how frightfully tempted I was! But I only poked it a little with my foot. It fell open for a second, and I saw the picture clearly, then it closed again.

Dearest, you know how it is to wake up in the middle of a frightfully ghastly dream and find yourself safe in bed? That is how I felt then. I drew the same long breath of sweetest relief and peacefulness, and said to myself in just the way you do, "It's all right! It's all right! Here I am!" For the picture in that blessed little pocketbook was I, the one sitting in the stern of the Lorelei that Thomas had lost! And all the time he was bewailing about his loss, French had quietly hung onto it!

I was so happy the harbor and all the boats seemed to spin round and round, and Mother Goose rimes rang

in my head like hymns of joy. No sooner had French sat down to his oars than he saw the pocketbook, and with a sharp look at me pounced on it. But my face was as innocent as a babe's.

I found I could look at him now without its hurting me inside. I seemed to have got myself back again, after having had some crazy girl's head by mistake. Do you know that rapturous feeling? And of course I wanted to tease him to pay him back—just a little. And I did! There are so many ways to tease a man! In spite of his stony face, I knew it hurt. And I was glad.

The next thing I had to do was to solve the mystery. Why did he treat me so, when he was carrying my picture around? Well, I found out, and I learned at the same time that it's not safe to play with a real man—when you care yourself, I mean. He made me very sorry for it.

WHEN we were still at Solomons one night we were asked to a party on another yacht. At the last moment I developed a headache, and the Buntings were obliged to go without me. I did have an ache; but it was in my heart—I already had my fill of teasing French.

After they got safely away I came up on deck. He was in the bow with his guitar. I called him back and made him sit beside me. He didn't try to come close like that idiotic Thomas.

"It was so hot below I couldn't stand it," I said, which was quite true.

For the first time he seemed to have lost his confident air. His eyes looked soft in the moonlight. I had to keep mine hidden for fear of showing too much.

"I'm sorry you're not well," he said awkwardly.

I was as well as well could be then; but I didn't say so. "Sing something," I said.

He shook his head. "I have no voice tonight," he said in a low tone.

I answered with the obvious thing. "You never do anything to please me!" Saying it to him sounded horribly flat.

"I'll tell you a story," he said, putting down the guitar.

"With lots of adventures?" I said. I didn't want to be flippant; but I couldn't help it.

He shook his head again. "This is a problem story," he said, "and you must supply the answer."

My heart began to beat like anything; for I guessed he was going to talk about us.

"Once upon a time there was a fellow," he began, "and he was as poor as Job's turkey—"

"Good!" I said. "I like to have the hero poor in the beginning."

"This isn't a hero," he said quickly; "an ordinary sort of fellow. He was so poor he couldn't give himself a decent education. And there was a rich man came along and offered to lend him the money to go through college, without any security. You see, the fellow couldn't work himself through, because he was taking

THE RIVALS

BY JOHN NEWTON HOWITT



a four years' course in two years, and he had to study night and day."

"Dearest, he was so nice, so manly and modest and tender! I was just longing to squeeze his hand or something, and instead there I was making frivolous remarks!"

"The fellow wanted an education more than anything else in the world," he went on, "and so he was mighty grateful to the man, and he swore to himself that he would pay off the debt of gratitude as well as the money. After he graduated he went to work for the man, paying him little by little, and everything went along all right until a girl came along."

"Was she pretty?" I asked.

"Yes," he said very low, "lovely enough to make the fellow's head swim; lovely enough to make him forget his gratitude to the man, and everything else in the world!"

"Fancy how sweet this was for me to hear! "Go on!" I said breathlessly.

"The man's son was in love with the girl, you see, and the man's heart was set on their getting married. In the circumstances the fellow's duty was plain—hands off! But he was taken by surprise. You see, he'd had to work so hard that girls had no part in his life up to that time, and he didn't know how to resist them. He was obliged to see her every day, and little by little he found himself caring in—though he despised himself for it."

"Didn't he ever happen to think about the girl?" I demanded indignantly.

"Yes," he said. "As long as he thought she was in love with the man's son, it was easy to keep his own feelings under; but by and by he began to suspect that she wasn't."

"Well?" I said, as he stopped.

"There you have the problem," he said. "Should the fellow tell the girl—or should he go on keeping it to himself?"

My heart beat so loud I thought he must hear it. What was I to say? I wanted him so; but I was furious at him too! I wasn't going to give in so long as his conscience was troubling him.

"It was for him to decide," I said sharply; "not her."

He hung his head a little. "Suppose he'd got to the end of his rope," he said, "and wasn't able to think any more about what was the right thing to do?"

It was so strange and sweet to see his stiff neck humbled at last! I just longed to throw my two arms around it. But he had put it up to me. I couldn't run the risk of having him feel sorry the next day. I finally got it out.

"The right thing for him was to keep it to himself."

"How I hoped he wouldn't obey me! But he did. Of course that's the answer," he said, raising his

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head. Their sadness I would have sung in a happier time; but now—*netucaul netucaul!* I would thank the saints on my knees for graves. *Netucaul netucaul!* O that I might set the gourd of water and the little sack of parched corn at the head for the journey! O that I might heap the stones over them and place the wooden cross! *Netucaul netucaul!* I would not then need to ask, 'Are my loved ones beaten? Do they scorch with fever? Where lie their unblest bones?' Where now are Juan and Miguel? Where are Dolores, Maria, and Magdalena? Where is Rosita, my wife, my *Omecoli*? Where is Pepita, my little one, light of my eyes, my *puasoul*? Her customs were the most enchanting of all children.

"What are your eyes, Pepita, my *puasoul*?"

"Little stars," she would say.

"What is your nose, O Pepita, my *puasoul*?"

"A little hill the stars twinkle down upon," she would say.

"Who will lead me to the grave of Pepita? *Netucaul!*"

The music ceased, and the Yaqui's head dropped forward. The thoughtless Sunday crowd, released from the spell, once more shuffled and chattered. Dad's voice was soon borne faintly from the far side of the trained bear's cage, expounding Bruin as he had expounded Diego. As the Yaqui showed no disposition to perform further, the few who lingered about his hut drifted away to other more lively attractions.

SUDDENLY Diego sensed a backward rush of people in his direction. He heard Dad's approaching voice choking and coughing with excitement. He heard tense mutterings of many.

Then some warm object, cloth enveloped, was thrust between his knees. A child! A little girl! For once the stoic Yaqui was taken off his guard. His body swayed. His hands played over her smooth straight hair, her soft little face, her thin shoulder blades.

"*Hachim! Hachim!* Is it thou, Pepita?" he groaned in anguish of suspense.

"Too tall; but then a year—a child grows in a year. Tell me thy name, Child, tell me thy name!"

No sound came from the little figure at his knees.

"Thy name!" he implored. "Oh, Santa Guadalupe, Virgin Mother, help her to tell her name!"

"Tontita," came in a disavowal little whisper.

"But that is no name," he protested with desperate patience. "Tell me thy name!"

The little creature was silent.

"Look at me! Am I thy father?"

"No," came the fluttering whisper.

"She is none of mine, poor little wail! She is not Pepita, my *puasoul*, and yet my children never saw me blind. It might—"

He caught her lightly by the shoulders. "Pepita, what are thy eyes?"

He seemed to wait many money-heaps for that question to sink down through layers and layers of bewilderment, fright, abuse, and tragic stillness. He forced himself to release her shoulders and repeat the question more gently.

"What are thy eyes, Pepita, my *puasoul*?"

The answer floated to the surface at last dreamily, as if unprompted by the child's conscious thought or memory, but merely an involuntary response to a familiar stimulus: "Little stars."

"And thy nose, Pepita, what is thy nose?"

"A little hill the stars

twinkle down upon," she breathed back.

Diego gathered the child up in his arms with such vehemence that she seemed in some danger of being crushed by paternal joy.

He had forgotten the crowd; but now he heard various chokings and soddings which were entirely new in his experience with the patrons of the park. Dad fairly bellowed as he danced about the Yaqui, slapping him frantically on the back. This great onrush of sympathy toppled over the barriers of race and blindness. For the first time since his Sonora days the Indian felt himself in the midst of human beings instead of vague, impersonal noises.

"Friends," he shouted, "friends, I have my Pepita!"

The Yaqui language was sufficiently luminous for once, and the crowd cheered until he carried the child inside his house. There he crooned over her as her mother might have done, and rocked her on the edge of the cot with such abandon that the money-heaps all jumbled together—which was not of the least consequence, as that was Diego's day to start a new calendar.

EXHIBIT Y

BY AMANDA MATHEWS

DIEGO, the blind Yaqui musician, sat on the edge of his cot within his diminutive hut of branches and dried grass. Across his knees lay a stringed instrument fashioned from an armadillo shell. Taken in conjunction with his primitive root-tree and the sounds he drew from this rilled armadillo, Diego constituted Exhibit Y in "Dad's Park of Educational Amusement."

Diego wore the usual garb of the Mexican peon,—white cotton blouse and baggy trousers, scarlet sash, peaked sombrero, and leather sandals. Even with his scarred eyeballs concealed by black goggles, his strong brown features were impressive. He had the athletic leanness and the magnificent chest development of his race. It is no marvel that a people with such chests should be almost unconquerable.

The American bedquilt that served as a mattress on Diego's cot was dotted along the edge by little hillocks, each rising over a week's pay in silver dollars. The Yaqui's board was thus his calendar of exile. Some piles were flattened; but he so distributed his few expenditures as not to invalidate the record.

Diego heard the gates creaking their Sunday afternoon opening and took his place on the bench before his hut. The day was fine, and he soon knew by the volume of shuffling and talk that the attendance was above the average. He waited until the shuffling was threaded by Dad's familiar step. Next followed the thump of Dad's placing his movable soapbox platform and its weary creak under Dad's substantial weight. Then the confused labile of idle talk was checked by the voice of the park's apple-cheeked old guardian.

The Indian recognized the proper names "Yaqui" and "Yucatan" in spite of Dad's flatted vowels; and the words were like smoke in the eyes, for he understood that Dad was expounding the defeat and deportation of his people; but there was no quiver of his bronze mask. He heard his own name, and judged correctly that it was being told how his eyes had been shot out by a Mexican soldier and himself left for dead in a bunch of underbrush, where he lay for two days before his own people found him.

Even at "Rosita" and "Pepita" his lean brown fingers made no faintest vibration of the strings on which they rested, though the words were like cactus thorns in the flesh. Rosita was his wife, shipped off to Yucatan with five of their children when he lay in the brush; Pepita, the youngest child, had been torn from the mother's arms and left behind as too small and cumbersome for the journey.

Here the Indian's mind branched off on a trail it was continually following these last weeks, although it led nowhere. Seven money-heaps ago, after one of Dad's speeches, an American woman had pressed forward and told Diego in broken Spanish that she was the wife of an American mine owner in Sonora; that she was leaving soon to join her husband there; that she would try to find Pepita and send her to Diego at the park. Very kind of the American señora; but Pepita had been lost over a year, he himself had searched and searched for some certainty regarding her, many of the Yaqui children thus abandoned had died—no, the matter was hopeless!

Diego was aware that Dad had ceased and he was expected to do his turn. Usually his performance, though conscientious as to quantity, was listless and mechanical. The visitors to the park were nothing but a jumble of unintelligible noises to him. His darkened eyes looked always into what had been when he was a man and alive,—so alive that he made songs for his people because, whatever they felt, he felt even more than they, felt it in his throat and his fingers till it had burst forth into song.

TODAY, for the first time since his home nest had been robbed, the spirit of improvisation was upon him. He broke into a singsong chant not unmelodious, flinging it out not to his shuffling, chattering audience, but



"Thy Name! Tell Me Thy Name!" He Implored.

to Rosita in far Yucatan. The music was as distinctly Yaqui as the words.

"I sing of my mating with Rosita, Rosita, my *Omecoli*, my dove. I was called to the house of the old men. I bowed my head while they scourged me with stinging words. I was poor, they said, a stealer of fish without the courage to drive off cattle. I was no runner; never did my enemy behold my face in battle. I lifted my head; I sent out my voice; I gave them back words for words till their hands they dropped. There she stood just without, my Rosita, my *Omecoli*, with all her family. The oldest man gave me a gun. 'You fire this into the sky,' he said; 'but Rosita's bullet shall find your heart if you are unfaithful!' Then Rosita fired the gun at the sky in her turn, and we feasted and danced; till the sun rose we feasted and danced."

Suddenly with an ery swing the music glided into the Yaqui wail over the dead. The tune was immemorial; but the words he set to it were the cry of his own peculiar grief.

"Graves! Graves! I sing of the gladness of graves!"

